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**Photos:** Bernie Sanders in the spotlight

U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont, is the longest-serving independent in the hi Congress.

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Story highlights

"Socialism" has turned into a buzzword, thanks to Bernie Sanders

CNN Opinion invited experts to weigh in on Americans' attitude toward different forms of socialism

(CNN) — At the first Democratic debate, Sen. Bernie Sanders acquainted many Americans with the [term](#) he uses to describe his program: "[democratic socialism](#)," touching off debate about exactly what the term means and why many Americans have traditionally reacted poorly to the socialist label.

What is democratic socialism and how would it change America's capitalist economy? And is it the right path for the United States?

CNN Opinion invited political scientists, economists and other experts to weigh in. What do you think? Share your thoughts with us in the comments section and on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Peter Dreier: What is democratic socialism, American-style?

In the early 1900s, socialists led the movements for women's suffrage, child labor laws, consumer protection laws and the progressive income tax. In 1916, Victor Berger, a socialist congressman from Milwaukee, sponsored the first bill to create "old age pensions." The bill didn't get very far, but two decades later, in the midst of the Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt persuaded Congress to enact Social Security. Even then, some critics denounced it as un-American. But today, most Americans, even conservatives, believe that Social Security is a good idea. What had once seemed radical has become common sense.



Peter Dreier

Much of FDR's other New Deal legislation -- the minimum wage, workers' right to form unions and public works programs to create jobs for the unemployed -- was first espoused by American socialists.

Socialists were in the forefront of the civil rights movement from the founding of the NAACP in 1909 through the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Socialists have long pushed for a universal health insurance plan, which helped create the momentum for stepping-stone measures such as Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s and Obamacare today.

In the 1890s, a socialist Baptist minister, Francis Bellamy, wrote "The Pledge of Allegiance" and a socialist poet, Katherine Lee Bates, penned "America the Beautiful." Throughout our history, some of the nation's most influential activists and thinkers, such as Jane Addams, John Dewey,

Helen Keller, W.E.B. DuBois, Albert Einstein, A. Philip Randolph, Walter Reuther, Martin Luther King, Eugene V. Debs, and Gloria Steinem, embraced democratic socialism.

During the Cold War, many Americans confused democratic socialism with communism. In fact, democratic socialists opposed the totalitarian governments of the Soviet Union, China and their satellites. That's because democratic socialism is about democracy -- giving ordinary people a greater voice in both politics and the workplace.

Although Sanders says that America needs a "grassroots political revolution," he is actually a reformer, not a revolutionary. His version of democratic socialism is akin to what most people around the world call "social democracy," which seeks to make capitalism more humane. [Read full essay.](#)

Peter Dreier is professor of politics at Occidental College and author of "The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame" (Nation Books, 2012).

Sally Kohn: Why Sanders asked us to look

In the first Democratic debate, Sen. Bernie Sanders was asked to explain "democratic socialism." His response was, "I think we should look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway."

So, when we look there what do we get? We see less economic inequality and more concern for the well-being of citizens. Let's look at some details.

Whereas in the United States, federal law allows people to take three months of unpaid parental leave, [Swedish law](#) gives new parents a combined 16 months of leave that they can use however they want during the first 8 years of their child's life. The law also entitles parents to receive 80% of their wages during leave.

In [average life expectancy](#), the U.S. is behind more than 30 countries. Spain, which boasts [one of the best health care systems](#) in the world, has a single-payer universal health care model. Switzerland, France, Norway, Sweden and Finland -- which have government-funded universal health care -- also rank higher than the U.S.



Sally Kohn

In the U.S., the average CEO makes 354 times more money than the average worker. In [Germany](#), one of the world's leading economies, CEOs make only 147 times more than workers -- which is still a lot, but less than double the rate in the U.S. Why is Germany less unequal? Because labor representatives and workers sit on corporate boards. That means when issues of pay come up, there are people in positions of power to speak up for workers' salaries and not just CEO and shareholder interests. It's no wonder that the average worker income in Germany is 16% greater than the average income in the U.S.

When you learn the details, democratic socialism looks pretty good, doesn't it?

Sally Kohn is an activist, columnist and television commentator.

Andrei Markovits: How the word evolved

People of very different political persuasions have called themselves socialists. French political theorists of the 19th century used the word to connote a system in which there was only communal property. Later, Karl Marx and collaborator Friedrich Engels appropriated the term and redefined it as a system in which there would be no private property, which to them was the source of all inequality, injustice and evil.



Andrei Markovits

Marx and Engels used the words "socialism" and "communism" interchangeably and believed such a system would create heaven on Earth. But they never really told us how one would transform capitalism and arrive at socialism. So people had to figure it out for themselves.

In Western Europe, most notably in Germany, Austria, the Scandinavian countries, even Britain (and to a much lesser degree in the United States) there emerged a huge movement, which called itself social democracy.

In essence, social democracy would provide a framework that was to transcend capitalism in a gradual manner, meaning with no revolution and with no violence, and through the legislative process install policies that would tame capitalism, improve the human condition and eventually move toward socialism. Those who thought this method was too soft

included the Russian Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin.

These two different paths to socialism led to people becoming bitter enemies. In the late 1960s, democratic socialism emerged and basically rejected the dictatorial and intolerant nature of communism, as well as the bureaucratic stalemate and boring institutionalism of conventional social democratic parties.

Bernie Sanders hails from this world and calls himself a democratic socialist. Will Americans accept his ideas? We'll find out.

Andrei S. Markovits is Arthur F. Thurnau Professor and Karl W. Deutsch Collegiate Professor of Comparative Politics and German Studies at the University of Michigan.

Van Jones: Sanders, paint your ideas as 'red, white and blue'

A surprising [47% of Americans](#) would vote for a socialist to be president. Bernie Sanders can become viable -- simply by winning over an additional 4%.

Could he? Probably. But not by appealing to foreign models (e.g., Denmark). Americans are skeptical of foreign, European solutions.

Fortunately for him, Sanders need not search overseas to see his values in action.



Right here in the United States, we have Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and the Veterans Administration -- all of which have socialist elements. Socialist ideas inspired much of the labor movement, which brought everyone something called "The Weekend."

Americans hate to admit this. But since the Great Depression, we have not had a true "market economy." We are a mixed economy -- blending (mainly) free market principles with some socialist ideals. Many of our nation's greatest social achievements were once called "socialist" -- including, for example, free public education.

Therefore, Sanders could talk about how his ideals have contributed to America's historical greatness. He could position himself as defending and extending the work of our grandparents -- who tamed Wall Street and softened the edges of industrial capitalism.

His praise of foreign lands gets him dismissed as both alien and red. Bernie Sanders would be better off showing how his ideas are actually "red, white and blue."

Van Jones is president of Dream Corps and Rebuild the Dream, which promote innovative solutions for America's economy. He was President Barack Obama's green jobs adviser in 2009. A best-selling author, he is also founder of [Green for All](#), a national organization working to build a green economy. Follow him on Twitter [@VanJones68](#).

Daron Acemoglu: Socialism vs. social democracy

There is much that's broken about the American economic and political system. The very high levels of income inequality, to which neither Republicans nor Democrats have yet articulated a coherent response, and the increasing political dominance of a few dozen very wealthy donors who hold both parties hostage, are the two most visible and symptomatic ills of our current malaise. So it should be no surprise that Bernie Sanders' talk of socialism has awakened us to alternative political paths.

Is more socialism a solution for America? No.



Daron Acemoglu

Merriam-Webster defines socialism as "any of various economic and political theories advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods." But when the means of production are under government ownership, political decision-making becomes centralized, often dominated by a single party.

Economic growth and shared prosperity are best cultivated under economic systems that rely on the market, while at the same time regulating the market to prevent monopoly and malpractice, and providing education, health, infrastructure and security to their population. Such an economic system can only survive in a durable fashion in a politically inclusive

society, blending individual freedom and democratic decision-making.

Socialism is consistent neither with such an economic system nor with its political underpinnings, and consequently, the track record of socialist countries to create prosperity has been pitiful.

But wait. Don't the socialist Scandinavian countries achieve high levels of income per capita with limited inequality? Doesn't China, with its one-party socialist/communist political system, outpace the United States? No and no.

The [Nordic system](#), which Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have followed for most of their postwar history, is social democracy, not socialism. It fosters markets and private entrepreneurship, but with a powerful welfare state providing a strong level playing field.

China's mixture of socialist (or communist) political system and state capitalism may have worked well for transforming an agricultural, poverty-stricken economy to an industrial one, but cannot and will not generate the innovations that are the lifeblood of any advanced economy.

The market economy is the only game in town for creating prosperity, and the question is how to find the right balance between incentivizing creativity, hard work and risk-taking and creating the essential public services, social safety nets and equality of opportunity.

Daron Acemoglu is Elizabeth and James Killian Professor of Economics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Tara Setmayer: It's antithetical to American exceptionalism

American exceptionalism wasn't built on the idea of redistributing wealth and big government promises of free stuff. Instead, success of this country derives from its historical roots of political liberty and economic freedom.



Tara Setmayer

Some, like Sen. Bernie Sanders, may point to countries like Denmark as examples of where democratic socialism works. But does it? Scandinavian countries have exorbitantly high taxes and a lot of welfare. Do you think this is the intent of our Founding Fathers?

Socialist countries strip individuals of their God-given rights to succeed in favor of the collective good. That is not the American way. Although socialism continues to be romanticized by leftist ideologues, they tend to ignore the historical failures of the socialist construct. Socialism fails because it not only discourages incentives to strive for excellence, it fosters a sense of entitlement.

Free stuff may sound great in theory but not in the real world. As the great Margaret Thatcher once said, "the problem with

socialism is you eventually run out of other people's money."

America is the Land of Opportunity because of its equal protection for any individual to pursue life, liberty and happiness. Not the government's forceful hand in the name of equality at the expense of freedom.

Tara Setmayer is former communications director for Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-California, and is a CNN political commentator. Follow her on Twitter [@tarasetmayer](#).

Lawrence Wittner: Inequality gave birth to socialism

The roots of socialism lie in the desire to foster greater economic and social equality by exercising popular control over the economy. During the 19th century, with the rise of giant corporations owned by individuals of vast wealth,

this impulse was strengthened, especially among workers and the poor.



Lawrence Wittner

democratic socialist parties.

Bernie Sanders champions the democratic socialist model, which would benefit all people rather than the wealthy few. With economic inequality growing in the United States in recent decades, it's no surprise that he is drawing widespread support.

Lawrence S. Wittner is professor of history emeritus at University of Albany, SUNY.

Karl Marx famously advocated that workers should take back the wealth they had produced for the corporate titans that had stolen it from them. In countries where democracy grew in the early 20th century, workers began to form socialist parties: the British Labor Party, the Swedish Social Democratic Party, the French Socialist Party, the Australian Labor Party, the German Social Democratic Party, and many others that, by winning elections, moved their countries toward a combination of democracy, civil liberties, and greater social and economic democracy.

However, in dictatorial societies, such as czarist Russia and authoritarian China, revolutions broke out, resulting in the establishment of communist regimes. The democratic socialist parties sharply rejected these new communist dictatorships, while the communist parties ridiculed the

Michael Booth: Where is Denmark heading?

I see the Hamlet headlines are being wheeled out again in the U.S. media: "Nothing Rotten in the State of Denmark," and so on.

Well, yes and no. Things are rarely as simple as politicians' sound bites would have us believe.



Michael Booth

It is true, life here in Denmark is pretty good. The Danes are rich, sexy and work fewer hours than anyone else among advanced countries. They enjoy low unemployment, free health care and free education all the way through university.

But the irony is, just as American politicians and economists are realizing that it might be worth taking a closer look at Denmark's so-called "Bumble Bee" economy (it shouldn't stay airborne but does), Scandinavian social democracy is disappearing.

Sweden came closest to all-out socialism in the 1970s, but set about reducing the scale of its welfare state in the 1990s, and Denmark is following. The truth is, a public sector of this scale is not sustainable in the long term. Income tax rates of 60% are hard to justify when Denmark's education system has languished in the middle ranks among international testing

standards and health service hasn't prevented the Danes' life expectancy to be one of the lowest in Western Europe.

The Danes know all this, and are discussing reform. American politicians really ought to look at where the Danes are aiming for, rather than where they've been.

[Michael Booth](#) is the author of "[The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the Myth of the Scandinavian Utopia](#)" (Picador). Follow him on Twitter: [@themichaelbooth](#)

Jeff Yang: Socialism can be warm and fuzzy

It's the S-word, the dark specter that has hung over the American Left since the terrible days of Joseph McCarthy's witch hunts and blacklists. Even today, socialism's tarnished reputation lingers. According to a 2012 Rasmussen poll, only 24% of Americans had a favorable view of it.



Jeff Yang

contributes frequently to radio shows.

No wonder, then, that modern Democrats have avoided close association with the term. But when brought out into the light of the sun and spoken about plainly, the aims of socialism are idealistic. Ask people on the street what they think about ensuring that workers have some means of controlling and benefiting from their own labor. Or about reducing the vast disparity that currently exists between the wealthiest and the most impoverished. (Even Donald Trump thinks that's a good idea!)

What about providing a common safety net to ward against crisis and protect the vulnerable? Absolutely -- after all, Medicare and Social Security are two of the most popular programs in American history. Bottom line: Socialism doesn't have to be cold and creepy when applied in the right way.

Jeff Yang is a columnist for The Wall Street Journal Online and

Andre Spicer: Socialism in disguise

When Karl Marx formulated his ideas about the inevitable decline of capitalism and the rise of socialism and the worker class, he asked himself a question: Where would this happen first? His answer: America. Marx, of course, [got it wrong](#).



Andre Spicer

Business School, City University London.

Americans are suspicious of socialism; [60% of those polled](#) react negatively to the term.

Yet the United States has different types of socialist entities, including the [military](#). It provides housing, education, health care, food and shelter for millions of Americans. It supports science and technology, and has bankrolled most of the great innovations which the United States prides itself on: the production line, humans on the moon and the [iPhone](#). The U.S. military reminds us that socialism is not a dream in the United States -- it is a day-to-day reality.

As Bernie Sanders' campaign rolls on, the question he may want to ask is whether socialism in camouflage is the only kind Americans are willing to accept.

Andre Spicer is a professor of organizational behavior at Cass

Maria Svart: What the fear is really about

Democratic socialism is the radical idea that those who create wealth should control it. If we had a truly democratic political system, the U.S. economy would work for ordinary people instead of just the greedy few who have rigged the game.

Those who advocate democratic socialism are not interested in creating a one-party centralized state. We simply believe that we all deserve a real voice, at every level of society.



Maria Svart

We can start with stronger unions, except that unions have been under siege for decades. We want worker-owned cooperatives instead of megacorporations where CEOs profit from paying poverty-level wages or handing out pink slips every couple of years, and then get golden parachutes when they leave.

We want to change our national fiscal priorities and redirect money from wasteful pork to paying for Medicare for all. We advocate for a secure and dignified basic standard of living for every American.

In the capitalist way of running our economy, the rich get richer while the rest of us get poorer. Because our vision of a deeply democratic society challenges corporate profits, the 1% tries to discredit democratic socialism by equating it with authoritarianism. It's a weapon they can use over and over

again to prevent any reforms to rein in corporate power.

Bernie Sanders challenges the "greed is good for everyone" mantra and isn't scared of being linked with the socialist label. That makes him extremely dangerous to those who prefer our economy to remain unbalanced and unequal.

Maria Svart is the national director of the Democratic Socialists of America.

David Azerrad: U.S. is a federated republic

Conservatives who cringe at Sen. Bernie Sanders' repeated invocations of "democratic socialism" may take solace in the fact that he is much more committed to democracy than he is to socialism. Sanders is a law-abiding elected representative running for a constitutional office -- not a revolutionary leader. And his socialism is not the Marxist intermediary stage on the way to a world communist state. Nor does it entail the nationalization of private industry.



David Azerrad

Sanders' democratic socialism basically amounts to European-style middle-class entitlements to provide all citizens "free" benefits, like health care, day care, paid leave and college. The U.S. already provides [generous benefits](#) to the elderly (40% of the federal budget) and the non-elderly poor (22% of the federal budget). Sanders wants to fill the gap and take care of the non-elderly and non-poor.

Setting aside the obvious problem of how a country already in the hole for more than [\\$200 trillion](#) will pay for this, there is a constitutional obstacle to implementing national democratic socialism. The United States, unlike its much smaller Scandinavian counterparts which Sanders seeks to emulate, is a federated republic. The national government is only tasked with a few core functions and paying for college isn't one of them. The states, by contrast, have very wide latitude

to govern themselves as they see fit. If the senator from Vermont wants to build a Sweden in the Green Mountains, he should run for state office and do so.

David Azerrad is director of B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics at the Heritage Foundation.

Samuel Goldman: Millennials don't have historic baggage

Bernie Sanders has made socialism cool, but I don't think we'll start imitating Denmark any time soon.



Samuel Goldman

When older Americans hear the word socialism, they think of the Soviet Union. They remember the Cold War and conclude that socialism is bad. People who came of age after 1989 don't make that connection. According to a [2011 Pew Research Center report](#), 49% of 18- to 29-year-old Americans reacted positively to the term. (In contrast, only 46% of this age group viewed "capitalism" in a positive way.)

Some Americans mistakenly associate socialism with Scandinavian countries, which in reality have large welfare states. Although these countries provide many benefits, none of them seriously limits private property or attempts centralized planning of their economies. That's for the best. Welfare states often prosper, but socialist countries are always poor.

So when Americans say they like socialism, they usually mean they don't like hard choices. They imagine having the good things a generous welfare state provides without higher and broader taxation, a more austere style of life, and a less diverse, dynamic culture. They need to understand that everything comes with a price, and that the Nordic model isn't perfect.

Samuel Goldman is assistant professor of political science at George Washington University.

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